

## The Facets of Diversity: The EFMC Perspective

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**Abstract:** Diversity in science refers to cultivating talent, while promoting full inclusion across the community. In medicinal chemistry and chemical biology, it enhances creativity and encourages contributions from multiple perspectives, leading to better decision making and broader scientific impact. The European Federation for Medicinal chemistry and Chemical biology (EFMC) embraces and promotes diversity, to ensure representation of all talents, and enable equality of opportunity through fairness and transparency. EFMC has historically paid continuous attention to diversity in terms of culture, geography and equilibrium between academia and industry, with over the last few years a focus on increasing gender balance, aiming at a fair representation of the scientific community and equal opportunities independently of gender. EFMC promotes cultural diversity as it reinforces openness and mutual respect. All scientific organizations of a scope compatible with its remit are welcome within EFMC, where their members benefit from a welcoming, psychologically safe, and stimulating environment. Herein, we describe the state of diversity within the EFMC, how the situation has evolved over the years and where diversity should be further encouraged.

### Introduction

Diversity is at the foundation of drug discovery as an independent area, in terms of its scope and its inclusion of multiple scientific disciplines<sup>[1]</sup>. In particular, chemical biology and medicinal chemistry are part of a scientific continuum where research activities and techniques overlap.<sup>[2]</sup> Considering the crucial role of inclusion in advancing science, we aim at describing the European medicinal chemistry and chemical biology community, with a particular focus on gender, cultural and geographic diversity.

The European Federation for Medicinal chemistry and Chemical biology (EFMC) supports all members of this scientific community,

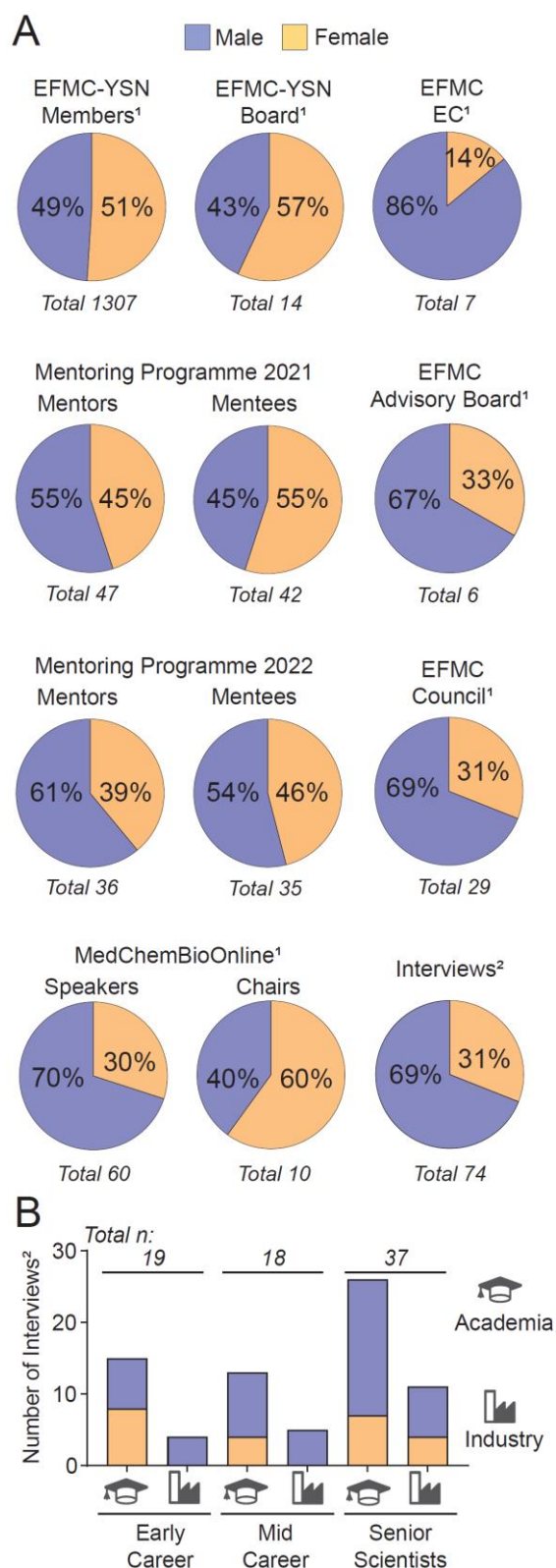
and is committed to make chemical sciences more inclusive and diverse.

As pointed out by the Royal Society of Chemistry,<sup>[3]</sup> a sense of belonging impacts innovation, creativity, productivity, collaboration, performance and progression. Being part of a group with a shared identity and being able to contribute to that network are pivotal aspects of belonging. The EFMC embraces diversity in all its forms, actively promoting equal opportunities, honesty, fairness, and transparency. It aims to inclusively represent all members of the community in its activities, create opportunities for people to talk, share experience and scientific knowledge, and make networking more inclusive. EFMC encourages diversity of views, and participation in its initiatives and scientific events independently of gender, nationality, personal characteristics, or circumstances. As defined in the EFMC regulations<sup>[4]</sup>, an appropriate balance between industry and academia, and between genders is required in the Executive Committee (EC). In addition, the composition of the working groups and teams is based on a good balance in expertise, gender, country, and academic vs industry profile.

EFMC believes that inclusion and diversification strengthen its research community and broaden its impact. EFMC is therefore committed to foster a medicinal chemistry and chemical biology environment that represents the diversity of scientists working within Europe. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and respect (DEIR) are among the core values of EFMC.

### EFMC and its Young Scientists Network (YSN)

EFMC is an independent association that represents 29 scientific organizations from 25 European countries. It actively promotes cooperation and encourages strong links between the national



**Figure 1. (A)** Pie chart representation of gender distribution across EFMC and EFMC-YSN, as well as some EFMC-YSN-promoted activities. For the mentoring programme, not all mentors have been paired. <sup>1</sup>Data latest update on 31.01.2022. MedChemBioOnline from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> edition. <sup>2</sup>Interviews for "I am a Medicinal Chemist/Chemical Biologist", from 2018 to 2022. Latest update 21.01.2022. EC = Executive Committee. We cannot comment on the gender composition of EFMC members, as the full dataset is not available: It is not mandatory to state the gender when registering to the EFMC. **(B)** Scientists involved in the interviews, divided for gender, career stage, and academia/industry affiliation.

adhering organizations, to deepen contacts and exchanges between medicinal chemists and chemical biologists in Europe and around the World. EFMC stands as a global key player contributing to advance the science of medicinal chemistry and chemical biology. It fulfils its objective by (i) organizing symposia and short courses, (ii) sponsoring meetings and medicinal chemistry schools, (iii) fostering communication, and (iv) conferring awards and prizes.

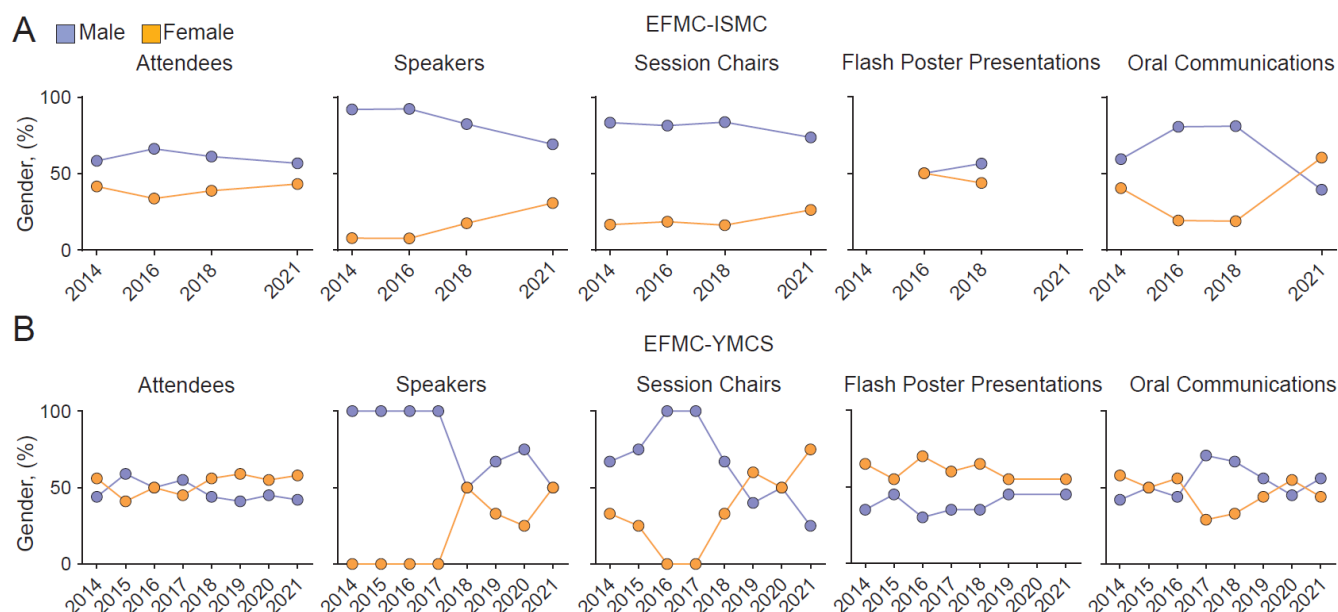
EFMC created the YSN to support early-career medicinal chemists and chemical biologists, and better include them in the scientific community. It also wanted to involve early career scientists in the rapid changes associated with the emergence of novel communication channels, as well as to foster the participation of women, since their percentage was rapidly increasing in the younger generation of scientists. Its motivation was clearly to enable early career scientists to influence EFMC's activities and its long-term strategy, while recognizing and addressing their current needs.<sup>[5]</sup> Gratifyingly, the YSN has recruited a very dynamic group of enthusiastic members, ensuring that all career stages have a voice in EFMC and actively contribute in shaping the community. The EFMC-YSN does not strictly enforce an age limit and allows people who followed non-traditional career paths to join at any time. The general aim of YSN is to bring young people together, and provide opportunities to medicinal chemists and chemical biologists early in their career.

## EFMC Steps Towards Gender Equality

Research demonstrates that diversity is strongly associated with improved organizational performance, better group decision-making, and increased motivation.<sup>[6]</sup>

Our discipline thrives on collaboration and connects diverse scientific fields. Gender balance is essential to represent our whole community, including different ideas and approaches.<sup>[7]</sup> EFMC has recently paid extreme attention to balanced participation and its community has become more gender-diverse. This is particularly apparent in the YSN, where gender balance has been achieved shortly after its creation, as exemplified by the composition of both its members and board (Figure 1A).

The EFMC-YSN Mentoring Programme has been launched in 2020 to connect motivated students with high-profile mentors. Its main objective is to support the transition of PhD and post-doctoral students into the job market by providing soft-skill training and overall guidance. During the creation of this mentoring programme, the Young Scientists Network has focused on gender balance in both mentor and mentee selection. Almost equal representation has been achieved in 2021, while the number of female mentors has slightly decreased in 2022, possibly representing a year-to-year variation. Another project, launched and promoted by the EFMC Communication Team, is the series "I am a Medicinal Chemist/Chemical Biologist", where the YSN interviews chemists working in EFMC's community. Up to now, a higher percentage of male scientists has been interviewed, but this merely represents the historical percentage of male scientists in the community. We expect this to change, in parallel to the evolution in gender representation across our entire network. Beside gender, we also investigated the career stage and the profile of the people participating in the interviews. A higher



**Figure 2. (A, B)** Gender distribution at EFMC-ISM (2014–2021, A) and EFMC-YMCS (2014–2021, B). Regarding EFMC-ISM, flash poster presentations have not been performed in 2014 and 2021, thus data points are missing. Regarding EFMC-YMCS, flash poster presentations have not been performed in 2020, thus data points are missing.

percentage of senior scientists (>12 years after PhD) were interviewed, while an almost equal number of early- (< 5 y after PhD) and mid-career scientists (EMCS, < 12 y after PhD) contributed to the interviews. Overall, more academics were involved in this EFMC activity with respect to researchers from industry (Figure 1B).

While an equal representation of both genders has already been achieved in the young medicinal chemistry and chemical biology community, the activities involving experienced and leading scientists still remains unbalanced due to a minority of women at more senior levels (see next paragraph). For this reason, a gender balance could not yet be reached in the EFMC Executive Committee (EC). In contrast, the EFMC advisory board and EFMC council involve a higher percentage of women scientists compared to the EFMC executive committee (33% and 31% vs 14%, Figure 1A). We expect further reduction of the gender gap in the near future, driven in particular by the increasing participation of EFMC's youngest members. Specific actions and policies to promote gender equality will also be implemented, to limit structural or institutional bias.

The EFMC aims to achieve a percentage of male and female speakers at EFMC conferences representative of the proportion of both genders in the community. In 2019 Edmond Differding deeply analysed the participation at the EFMC-ISM (International Symposium on Medicinal Chemistry) congress.<sup>[8]</sup> From less than 8% in 1970, 39% of the attendees were females in 2018. During the 2021 edition, the female participants increased to 43%. Similarly, the percentage of female speakers at the EFMC-ISM increased over the years: From only 6% in 2014, they reached 31% in 2021 (Figure 2A), even though equal gender representation could not be achieved yet, most likely due to the lower percentage of senior female scientists. Despite the slight increase over the years, the section chairs were also predominantly males with only 26% of female scientists in 2021.

A gender balance was achieved in 2018 in the flash poster presentations, and in 2021 a higher number of women were involved in the oral presentations with respect to men (61% vs 39%, Figure 2A). This is probably related to the involvement of younger scientists in the poster and oral presentations.

Indeed, the community clearly becomes more gender-diverse if we consider its younger members and focus on the EFMC-YMCS (Young Medicinal Chemists' Symposium). The attendees' gender ratio at the EFMC-YMCS did not change notably from 2014 to 2021, being always close to parity (Figure 2B). This was not the case for the speakers' profile: With 100% male speakers from 2014 to 2017, gender balance was only achieved in 2018 and 2021, with equal representation of males and females. However, we have to consider that only two speakers have been involved in the first editions (up to 2018), while four to six speakers were present at the following meetings, making it easier to focus on balanced representation of women and men – and making statistics more meaningful. Plenary speakers at the EFMC-YMCS are mid-career to senior scientists, while oral communications and flash poster presentations are mostly delivered by early career researchers. A particular attention has also been paid at the gender of chairpersons and the profile of the YMCS chairs evolved too. After a lack of female chairs in the 2016 and 2017 editions, women have been over-represented in 2021 (75%). Overall, EFMC-YMCS has witnessed a substantial increase in female participation over the years, with gender balance being achieved during the 2021 edition (Figure 2B).

During the pandemic, the YSN decided to launch "MedChemBioOnline", a series of webinars which merge science, soft-skills training and round table discussions. The webinars aim to meet the current needs of our scientific community to continue interacting and sharing ideas and innovation, as well as providing early career scientists with opportunities to listen to outstanding scientists and expand their knowledge. Ten editions took place so

far and more are planned for the near future. Despite the speakers of the MedChemBioOnline having been predominantly males, the EFMC-YSN gave a significant visibility to women scientists as chairs (Figure 1A). The 4<sup>th</sup> MedChemBioOnline was purposely dedicated to gender balance and inclusion. After an insight on the contribution of women in medicinal chemistry and concrete actions to increase their representation, the event focused on a round table discussion on how gender balance can be improved.

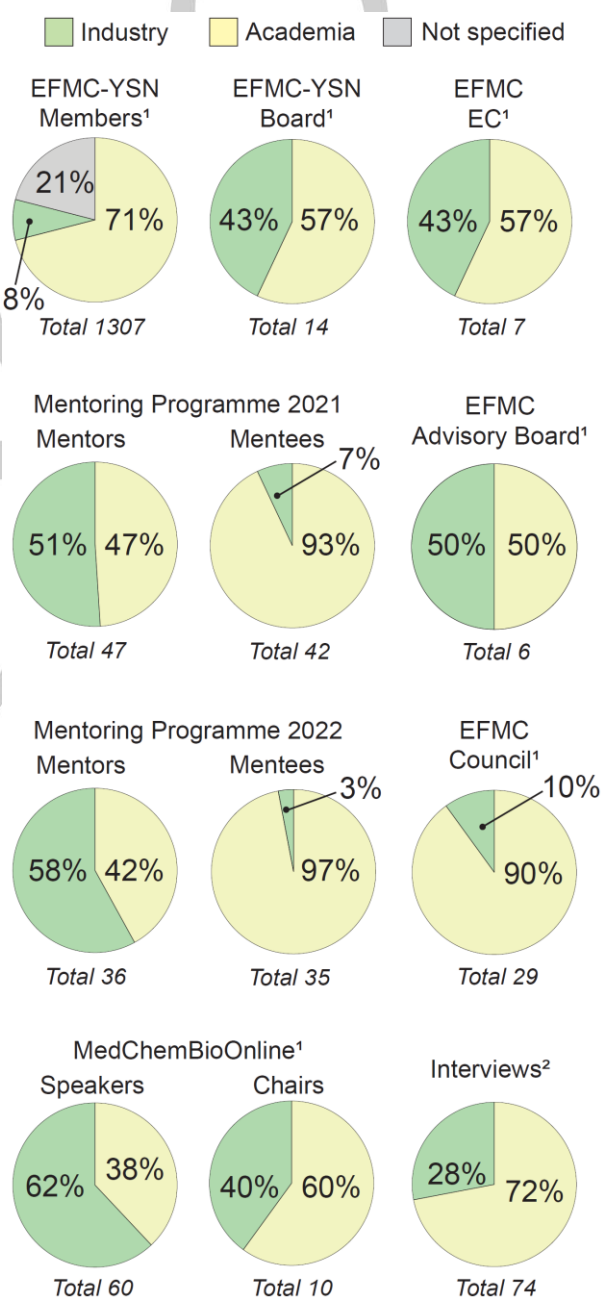
## Managing the Change in Gender Distribution

The evolution of gender distribution across the European chemistry community requires careful management, to avoid creating unfair or unbalanced dynamics. As we have seen, the current gender ratio in young professionals is almost exactly 50:50. In the 1990's, this ratio was still 85:15, with a minority of women.<sup>[9]</sup> A consequence of the magnitude and rapidity of this evolution is that the gender ratio of experienced scientists (e.g. with over 20 years seniority) has not had time to catch up, and remains unbalanced. While this issue will disappear in a decade or two, the widely spread expectation that all speaker panels, boards and seniority levels in both academia and industry should now be gender-balanced creates a very strong pressure on the few female scientists with this level of experience. It is as 15% of the workforce should be as present and visible as the other 85%: This is not only unrealistic, but a potential threat for women in these positions, as they see an accumulation of duties and responsibilities taking them away from their true scientific interests. Indeed, it has become difficult to recruit women for certain tasks, due to their increased involvement in external duties and decreasing availability. Care must be taken not to overload them and manage expectations. Our community must show understanding and keep in mind that gender balance, while a clear aspiration, should not be imposed when it creates unfair treatment. On the other side, accelerating the empowerment of women as leaders in medicinal chemistry and chemical biology would be beneficial for future generations. Indeed, high-level female leaders could be powerful and positive role models for younger women and strengthen their personal and professional development.<sup>[10]</sup>

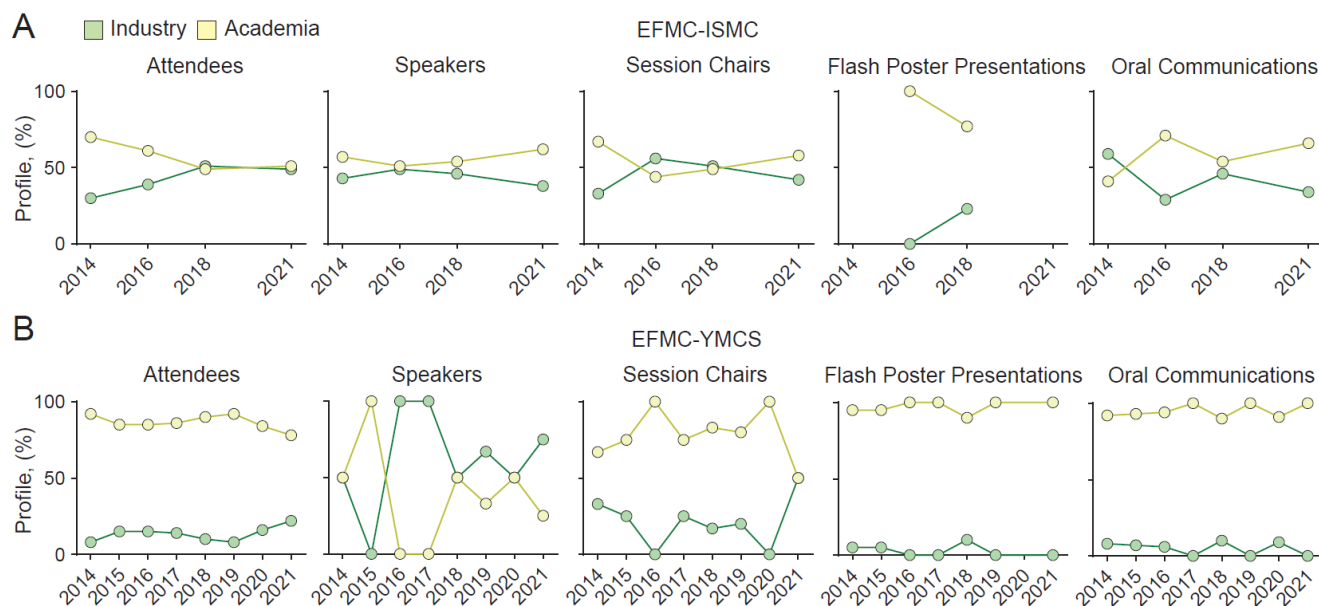
## Representing the Industrial, Academic and Biotech Community

Academic and industry scientists apply the same scientific principles, in different environments and to a certain extent to different objectives. Both have their strengths. This is an area where EFMC provides an opportunity for interactions and networking where diverse opinions are compared, encouraging dialogue and collaboration between industry and academia. In all its activities, and as defined in its regulations,<sup>[4]</sup> EFMC gives a voice to researchers from different working environments, promoting a diversity of views from industrial, biotech and academic researchers. For instance, the Executive Committee must include representatives from both academia and industry, like it must include representatives of both genders and ensure that all members represent different countries. The EFMC-YSN board is composed by a balanced representation of scientists from academia and industry (57% vs. 43%). In contrast, the YSN

community, which includes many students, is mainly composed of scientists affiliated to universities, with only 8% of industrial researchers (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the composition of the EFMC-YSN board reflects that of the EFMC executive committee (EC) in terms of its industry-academia balance. Academics represent the highest percentage of members in the EFMC council (Figure 3), mirroring the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is not active at the same level in all countries across Europe. In the EFMC advisory board nevertheless, we see a balanced representation of scientists from academia and industry.



**Figure 3.** Academia-Industry Balance. For the mentoring programme, not all mentors have been paired. <sup>1</sup>Data latest update on 31.01.2022. MedChemBioOnline from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> edition. <sup>2</sup>Interviews for "I am a Medicinal Chemist/Chemical Biologist", from 2018 to 2022. Latest update 21.01.2022. EC = Executive Committee.



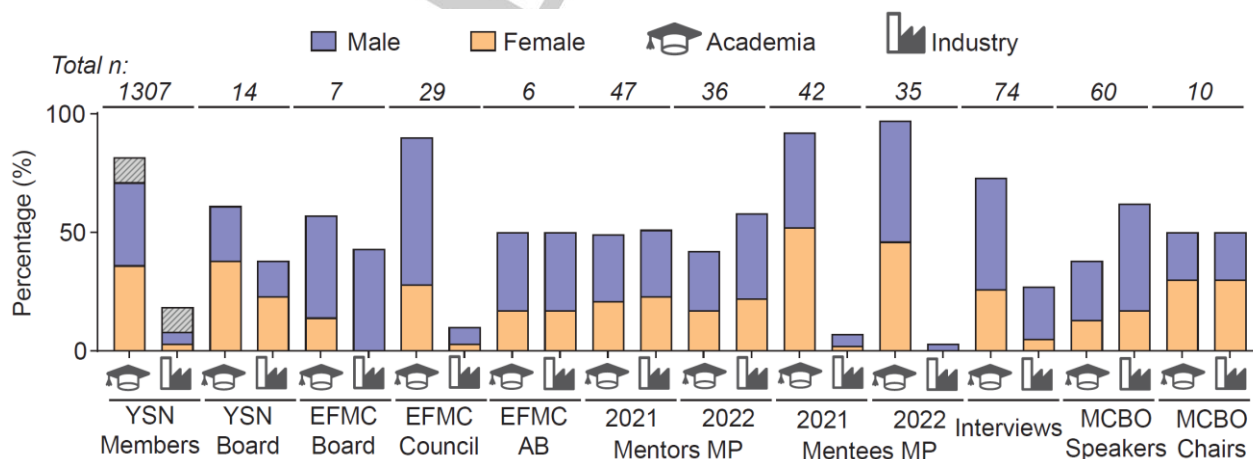
**Figure 4.** (A, B) Academia and industry distribution at EFMC-ISMIC (2014–2021, A) and EFMC-YMCS (2014–2021, B). Regarding EFMC-ISMIC, flash poster presentations have not been performed in 2014 and 2021, thus data points are missing. Regarding EFMC-YMCS, flash poster presentations have not been performed in 2020, thus data points are missing.

We have also analysed the participation of academics and industrial scientists in EFMC and EFMC-YSN activities: The mentoring programme equally represents mentors from industry and academia, while the mentees are predominantly students in universities. This profile nicely illustrates one of the goals of the Mentoring Programme: Exposing PhD students and postdoctoral fellows to a variety of career opportunities and paths. Academics are over-represented in interviews, while scientists working in companies have been more involved as speakers of the MedChemBioOnline series (Figure 3). This discrepancy is partially due to individual preferences, with a stronger interest of members of academia to participate in the interviews, while members of industry seem to prefer contributing to MedChemBioOnline symposia.

We also analysed the profile of participants at the EFMC-ISMIC and EFMC-YMCS and its evolution over time (Figure 4A and 4B). Edmond Differding reported increasing numbers of scientists from academia participating in the EFMC-ISMIC over the years.

Originally these meetings attracted a large majority of participants from industry, with over two thirds of industrial attendees until the late 1990s.<sup>[8]</sup> This changed at the turn of the century with an increased number of academic participants (see example from 2014 edition, Figure 4A). Equal participation was reached at the 2018 and 2021 editions (Figure 4A). In 2016 and 2018, a balance profile was observed regarding ISMC speakers and chairs. At the last edition (2021), industry and academia were similarly represented as session chairs (42% vs 58%), while more speakers were affiliated to academia (38% industry vs 62% academia). After a balanced profile in oral presentations (OC) reached in 2018, a higher number of OC was delivered by academics in 2021 (Figure 4A). In 2016, all flash poster presentations, involving mainly early career scientists, were from academics, while in 2018 we observed an increased contribution from industrial PhDs or Postdocs (Figure 4A).

As expected, most of the attendees of the EFMC-YMCS were students and postdoctoral fellows from academia. In line with the



**Figure 5.** Intersectionality of diversity within the EFMC. The gender representation within academia and industry is reported. Abbreviations: AB = Advisory Board; MP = Mentoring Programme; MCBO = MedChemBioOnline. Gray: not specified during EFMC-YSN registration.

attendee profile, oral communications and flash poster presentations have been delivered mainly or entirely by academic young scientists. The higher participation of young scientists from universities is mostly related to the higher number of PhDs and postdoctoral researchers in academia with respect to industrial ones. The YSMC also invites speakers from academia or industry for plenary lectures. Due to the small numbers of these lecturers (two lectures each year from 2014 to 2018), the academia to industry ratio had originally little meaning and was not monitored, leading to large variations from a year to the next. In contrast, for the last three editions, four to six speakers were invited, allowing for a more balanced distribution between speakers from academic research groups and pharmaceutical companies (Figure 4B).

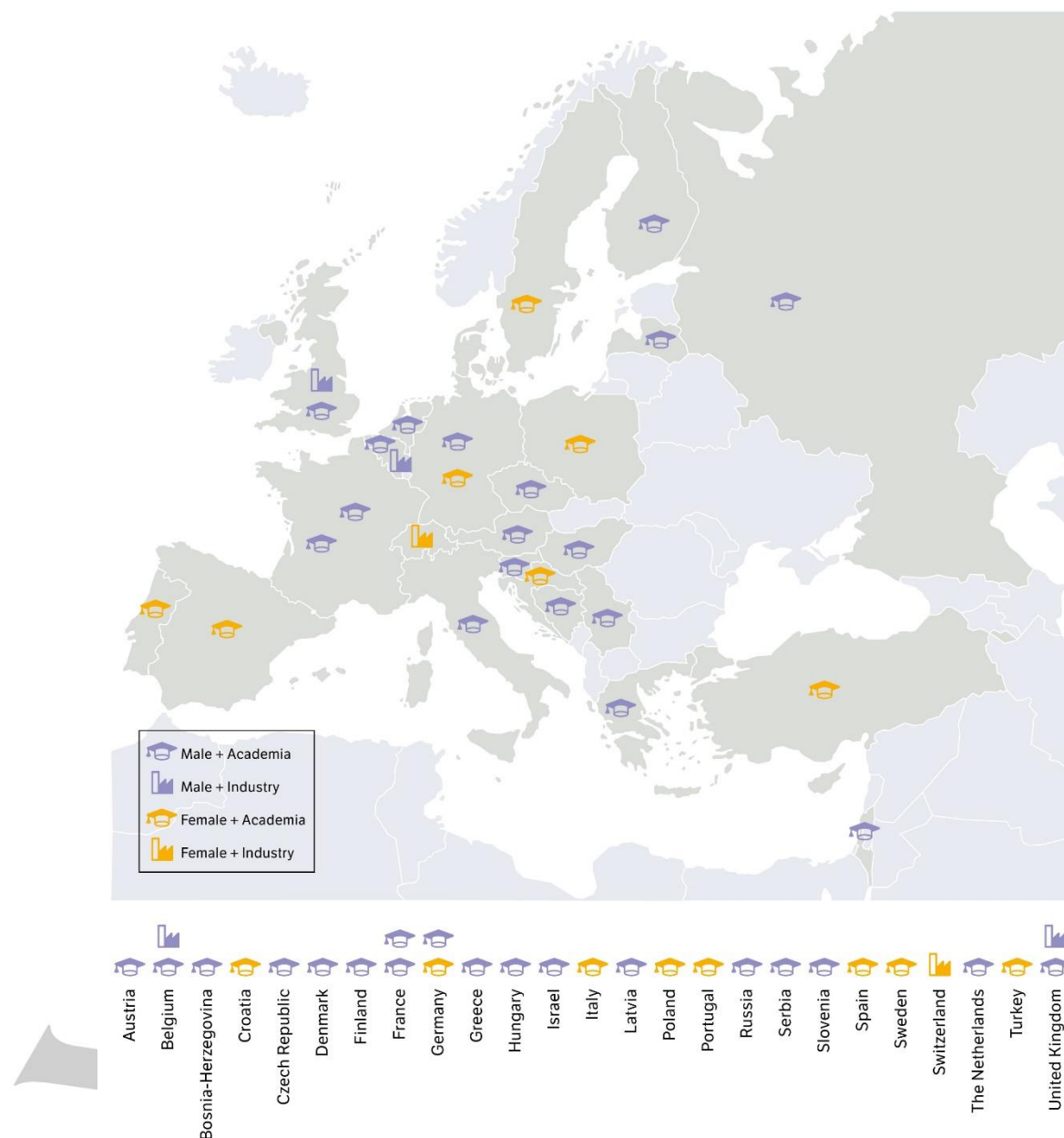
The session chairs of YSMC symposia have traditionally been mostly from academia (Figure 4B), but a big effort has been done

to better involve industry representatives and reach equal representation in 2021.

The gender distribution within the academic and industrial sub-populations has been also analysed across the structure of EMFC organization and its activities, and is summarized in Figure 5.

### Geographical Diversity: Cultural Impact

EFMC regroups 25 countries and could easily take for itself the motto of the European Union, "United in Diversity", which nicely summarizes how medicinal chemists and chemical biologists in Europe see themselves. EFMC has a historical advantage in this respect: While inclusion requires constant attention, it benefits from a tradition of cultural diversity that reinforces openness and mutual respect. There is no uniform European medicinal chemistry and chemical biology culture. In contrast, diversity is



**Figure 6.** Map of EFMC Adhering Organizations (NAOs). The gender and profile (academia/industry) of each representative is shown.

ingrained in the tissue of the Federation: Besides using quotas to balance gender and the number of members representing industry or academia, EFMC's regulations<sup>[11]</sup> promote the involvement of members of all origins. All European national associations member of EFMC<sup>[12]</sup> are equally represented in the Council (Figure 6), which is EFMC's decision body. Membership in the Executive Committee is restricted to one person per country, bringing together members from all over Europe and representing not only different communities, but also different cultural backgrounds. Also, the presidency alternates between industry and academia. Finally, EFMC also takes great care to rotate the organization and hosting of EFMC symposia across Europe,<sup>[13]</sup> selecting session chairs and speakers to represent as many national organizations as possible. Considering all criteria simultaneously turns into an interesting balancing exercise when putting a scientific program together.

We have analysed the geographic diversity of the scientists involved in the "I am a Medicinal Chemist/Chemical Biology" interviews in correlation with their gender and affiliation (Figure 7). Different career stage researchers (see Figure 1B) from many countries - in and outside Europe - were interviewed (Figure 7).

EFMC provides a unique environment with multiple opportunities for inter-cultural interactions and developing common understanding, which avoids cultural levelling through the development of universal rules and points of view. This results in a rich exchange of ideas and occasional debate, conducive to creative approaches and solutions.

Diversity has multiple facets, and its cultural acceptance is more critical than quantitative measurements. In fact, diversity and inclusion can only be reached when they are truly implemented in an organization, and become a way of life rather than a discussion topic. Nevertheless, the often-heard expectation "the more

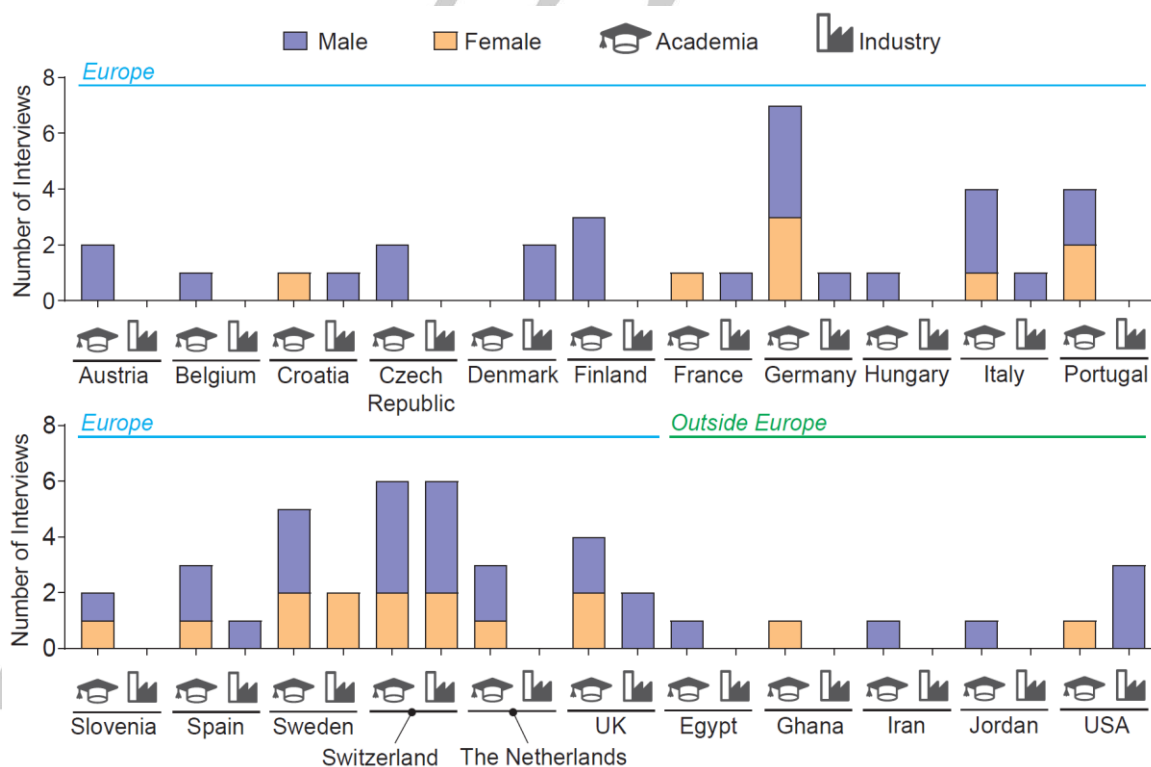
diversity the better" has its limits too, and reality is more complex.<sup>[14]</sup> What counts for a federation like EFMC is not necessarily to foster diversity without limits, but rather to ensure equal opportunity and conditions where all members can benefit from a welcoming, psychologically safe, and stimulating environment.

Often geographic diversity mirrors cultural diversity, which is essential to merge different perspectives of the world and of science. Cultural diversity favors the investigation of different questions and the analysis of the same scientific problems from different angles, contributing to a more complete understanding of the topic. Not surprisingly, the success of EFMC, as an inclusive space across the European continent, reflects its commitment to cultural diversity.

## Conclusion

Diversity, inclusion and respect are core values of the EFMC, which aims to represent all members of the community in its activities. All age groups have a voice in EFMC, thanks also to the creation of the YSN supporting early-career medicinal chemists and chemical biologists.

Historically there has been a minority of women in the chemistry environment compared to male scientists. Recently, we have witnessed a rapid evolution in gender representation as highlighted by the pool of younger members where male/female equal distribution has been already achieved. The EFMC is paying significant attention to gender balance in all its actions. The gender representation is still unbalanced in the activities involving experienced scientists due to the lower percentage of senior female scientists. We expect a reduction of the gender gap



**Figure 7.** Geographic diversity of the scientists involved in the "I am a Medicinal Chemist/Chemical Biology" interviews, in correlation with their gender and profile (academia/industry).

in the near future, largely driven by the increasing participation of EFMC's youngest members.

EFMC also provides opportunities for interactions between industrial, biotech and academic scientists, as diversity of views boost and strengthen our community. Significant efforts are being done by the EFMC to achieve an industry-academia balance and to encourage dialogue between pharma and university affiliated researchers.

EFMC is also keen on representing the culture and geographic diversity of Europe, involving members of all origins. Our goal is to empower medicinal chemists and chemical biologists, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Diversity in terms of gender, culture, geography and the equilibrium between industry and academia allows a rich exchange of ideas and a creative way to approach problems and deliver solutions. Additional facets of diversity, including psychological factors such as unique background and individual differences, also have an impact on the ways of approaching and solving problems, as well as in creating a successful network, but this will not be discussed in the current Editorial. Diversity is known to balance biases and EFMC is embracing diversity to enable equity of opportunities through fairness and transparency.

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**Keywords:** inclusion • equity • medicinal chemistry • chemical biology • EFMC • Young Scientist Network

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## EDITORIAL

## Entry for the Table of Contents



**Inclusion across our community:** EFMC pays continuous attention to diversity in terms of gender, culture, geography and equilibrium between academia and industry. We aim at an environment that represents the diversity of Europe and gives voice to different ideas and approaches. Our community has evolved over the years, driven by the principles of full inclusion and equity of opportunities.

Institute and/or researcher Twitter usernames: @EuroMedChem @YoungSciNet @BorsariChiara @RuiMoreira\_UL @YvesAuberson